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Us versus Them
Splitting Dynamics and Turning Points in Ethnopolitical Conflict

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Abstract

Ethnopolitical conflicts tend to escalate to a point where it seems impossible to acknowledge the “other” without giving up oneself. This article argues that split images of self and the “other” are effective in such conflict dynamics.

Externalizing everything that is weak, bad, and inhumane onto “them” enhances a feeling of togetherness, strength, and heroism within “us”. In times of sparse resources and political instability the tendency to find security and orientation in such politically exploitable exclusion mechanisms is high. The article describes the division into a heroic self and a worthless “other” as an entrapment; it shows its allurements as well as its hopelessness once established. Examples of a successful turn to de-escalation will finally suggest that there is a way out of murderous dichotomies that some people can initiate from within themselves.

Us versus Them

Splitting Dynamics and Turning Points in Ethnopolitical Conflict

If a conflict between groups of people escalates to the point of murder, that conflict is no longer solely about the allocation of power and resources. There will have been established extremely split images of 'self' and the 'other', and the acceptance of the 'other' appears to be possible only at the price of self-abandonment: either we kill 'them' or they will kill 'us'.

Vamik Volkan developed the psychoanalytic concept of group identity and described how such a development gains momentum and can be driven to the point of deadly escalation (Volkan 2007). This paper describes the dynamic of splitting as an entrapment. It discusses the attractiveness of splitting for the members of the group and its hopelessness, once it becomes established. Some examples of turning points will suggest that there is a way out of murderous dichotomies, a way that some people can initiate from within themselves.

Division into Humans and Non-humans

I begin with a story from the Vietnam War (Welzer 2005). It is about the mass murder in My Lai, an extremely gruesome act against defenseless Vietnamese civilians by American soldiers. Women with small children were shot dead and later the soldiers were asked by an investigative commission to describe the incident:

A: I held my M16 at them.

E: Why?

A: Because they could have attacked.

E: It concerned children and babies?

A: Yes.

E: And they could have attacked? Children and babies?

A: They could have had hand grenades. The mothers could have thrown them at us.

E: The babies?

A: Yes.

E: Were the mothers carrying the babies in their arms?

A: I think so.

E: And the babies wanted to attack?

A: I was anticipating that at any moment they would counterattack. (cited in Welzer 2005:222-223).

This example shows that in highly escalated conflicts a blatant denial of reality sustains the perception that ‘they’ are the bad ones, and that destroying ‘them’ is a right and necessary act of the good ones. Welzer elaborates that in the perception of the American soldiers, the ‘other’, the Vietnamese, were no longer human. Rather, they were, like dangerous animals, a kind of eerie, murderous jungle creatures. One can perhaps generalize and state that the more undifferentiated and the less human the members of the other group are perceived to be, the more inhumanly they will be treated by those who have that perception, and perceive themselves as the good.

Relief Function of the Split

What is it that induces humans to develop such a split perception of ‘us’ and ‘them’, of ‘self’ and ‘the other’? Decisive for a group’s identity is the collective

image of its history, their told and ever again retold common *So-geworden-Sein*¹

with its ups and downs. With this mythical collective image of the group's history, specific fears and desires are connected: the fear of collective trauma repeating itself, such as displacement, destruction, or forced assimilation; the fear of revenge by other groups once defeated; the desire for the reestablishment of past greatness; the return home to a territory of origin; the compensation for suffered humiliation; or for getting rid of a foreign rule. (Volkan 1999, 2007). In times of peace group identity is weak, its boundaries are in flux, and group identity coexists with numerous other affiliations (Sen 2006). But in times of conflict, due to scarce resources and political instability, people are inclined to move together in *Schicksalsgemeinschaften*². Other affiliations step back and the mentioned hopes and fears are taken up and exploited by political leaders in order to rally the group behind them (Volkan 1999, 2007; Kaufman 2005).

The propaganda in highly escalated conflicts suggests that now the time has come to put right everything that went wrong for the group thus far; that the 'other', inhuman by nature, must be annihilated before 'we' are annihilated by 'them'; and that through this final victory, one's own group will find its true greatness and goodness.

Wide spread in such times are simplified interpretations of group history according to the pattern of (i) paradise, (ii) banishment, and (iii) redemption, the logic being once we lived in an ancient time of paradise, we were banished and our suffering was great, but now redemption is at hand. The redeemer has taken the form of a political leader. For example, in the time of National Socialism in

1 How they became to be what they are.

2 Communities of fate.

Germany, the Germanic peoples represented the ideal ancient time. The banishment was the “Roman-liberal-French foreign domination”. The redemption was the *Reich*, the symbol of the return to the inner unity and outer greatness of the German people lead by a strong Führer (Lübbe 1989). The following are quotations from scientific writings of Nazi historians of law, in which such secularized hopes of salvation were expressed:

Hans Erich Feine

In 1933 he wrote: “The German People has awakened to a Nation-State and, in the form of the NSDAP, is finally taking its destiny into its hands” (Feine 1933:5). Feine entitled another one of his works “Thousand Years of German Longing for the Reich and its Realization” (Feine 1935).

Ernst Rudolf Huber

At the beginning of World War II he wrote “*We have all experienced and experience it anew daily, how the mission of the Reich is taken up and coped with by the German people through the deeds of the Führer*” (Huber 1941:14).

Karl Gottfried Hugelmann

In 1940 he wrote: Those who “*are sensible to the events of a thousand years of history and of the present time as a whole*”, cannot mistake that the development of the “*true Volkspersönlichkeit*”³, provided that the burden of statehood can be expected from the people in question at all, is only possible in an “*order erected and guaranteed by the Reich*”. “*...we reverentially feel God’s duty in this call out of blood and history.*” (Hugelmann 1940:217-221).

The allure of the division into humans and nonhumans consists in the hope of a final victory over all evil and weakness, which now can be thrown out and

3 The Personality of the entity “the people”.

destroyed forever with the 'other'. The depreciation and exclusion of the 'other' increases within one's own group, now perceived as cleansed and strengthened, feelings of togetherness and security. It then appears feasible to heal all the blame, shame, powerlessness, and humiliation that the group's destiny has brought to it, and to become at last great and whole, good and pure. Essentially this is the hope of paradise on earth.

Hopelessness of the Split Condition

What makes it so difficult, if not impossible, to find a way out of such dynamics? The case of Battalion 101 serves as an illustration here (Goldhagen 1996; Welzer 2001). The Battalion 101 was a unit of about five hundred men, who murdered ten thousands Jews at the time of National Socialism. Before the first execution, the Commander explained to the line-up of troops, what they were to do, that it was hard to do, and that anyone who was affected too much by such an act, was given the opportunity to step out of the line. Ten or twelve men, out of five hundred, were able to step out.

Were *able* to step out? Isn't it, if anything, astonishing, that four hundred and ninety men were able to stay, and to execute innocent and defenseless human beings? Unfortunately not. The men did not live within our frame of reference, which forbids the killing of others because of their religious beliefs. They lived within the frame of reference created by National Socialist propaganda, which had turned the disposal of humans belonging to the 'other' into a moral demand instead of a reprehensible act. This is the substance of Himmler's speech in Posen:

I want to mention a very difficult chapter here before you in all openness... I mean the evacuation, the eradication of the Jewish people... the majority of you will know what it means, when 100 bodies lie together, when 500 or when 1,000 are lying there. It has hardened us that we kept going with this

and, with the exception of some human weaknesses, remained decent while doing so. This is a never before written, glorious chapter in our history. We had the moral right, we had the duty towards our people, to kill these people, who wanted to kill us.” (cited in Welzer 2001: 265 - 266)

Thus the frame of reference is: to kill the ‘other’ is an existential part of self defense, it must and will be done, and it requires great strength. Those who opt out do not have this strength, they are feeble, leave the heavy, but necessary burden to their comrades and thus abandon both the group and its leader. Under the rule of split images of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, stepping out of the “we-group” means falling into the excluded. The message is either one takes part in the duty, stays big and strong, good and respected, secure within the group, or one is weak, bad, isolated, guilty, humiliated and in consequence part of those who deserve annihilation. There is no alternative, no “third location” to go - as far as the split eye can see.

The exclusiveness of the alternative between good and evil, strong and weak, belonging and isolation, glory and shame, power and powerlessness is at some point no longer just a question of blind perception. It becomes a deadly reality. During the genocide in Rwanda the Hutu did not solely murder Tutsis but also moderate Hutus, who were not willing to comply with the killings. Thus, whoever could not decide themselves to be on the side of the perpetrator, remained on the side of the victim. It was reported that the murdering of moderate Hutus was particularly gruesome. That is plausible. Somebody killing a Hutu that is sympathetic to the Tutsi kills his own doubt on what he and his group are doing. And the further advanced these deeds are, the bigger the loss of reality, the more colossal the discrepancy between what supposedly is good and necessary and really is dreadful and inhumane, the more threatening is everything that renders the

‘other’ human again, that stands for a connection between the divided groups, for a common ground and the possibility of coexistence.

Sometimes the leaders of large groups are trapped themselves. If a leader, facing the never-ending cycles of violence and counter-violence and the associated cultural and economical downfall, wants to initiate a turn of policy, reestablish negotiations, make concessions, or accept the mediation offered by a third party, he may lose his status as a strong leader admired and supported by his people. Each step toward the ‘others’ is perceived as a step towards weakness, failure and shame, and threatens the group with the reality of its inhumane deeds and the loss of the anticipated paradise. If the group is not ready for that, the leader will be removed (Kaufman 2001).

Turning Points

“Turning point” means the first step out of the described entrapment, the moment of re-emergence of a “third location”, where coexistence is possible, the glimpse of common humanity beyond the aggressor/victim and other dichotomies. How can we explain, in face of the described alternatives that, after all, a dozen members of Battalion 101 refused involvement in the killings? As there was no escape that could be found outside, they must have had some “third location” within themselves, a salvaged humane view of the excluded, a place where, contrary to all messages from the prevailing authorities and in face of the uncertain consequences for their own existence, to step out of the line did not mean falling into isolation and worthlessness.

An example of such an “inner third location”, even in the face of death, is Josué, part of a community of *campesinos* in the Columbian jungle. For many

years it was a conflict zone of different guerrilla and military factions. Whoever controlled the territory, demanded obedience, support, and silence. When a family member was lost to the conflict, the rest of the family had to keep quiet about the incident. At the highest point of escalation, an army captain asked the *campesinos* to take up weapons and join his troops, and he would in turn forgive them for their alleged support of the guerrillas. He told them that they could arm themselves, join the Commander, join the guerrillas, leave home, or die. Josué responded:

You speak of forgiveness, but what do you have to forgive us [for]? ... We have killed no one. You want to give us millions in weapons paid for by the state, yet you will not facilitate even the minimum credit for our farming needs. There are millions for war but nothing for peace. How many men in arms are there in Colombia? By rough calculation I would say at least 100,000, plus the police, plus 20,000 guerrillas, not to mention the Paras, the drug lords and private armies. And what has all this served? What has it fixed? Nothing. In fact Colombia is in the worst violence ever. We have arrived at the conclusion that weapons have not solved a thing and that there is not one reason to arm ourselves. We need farm credits, tools, tractors, trucks... Captain, with all due respect, we do not plan to join your side, their side or any side. And we are not leaving this place. We are going to find our own solution” (cited in Lederach 2005:14-15).

What had Josué done? He was confronted the alternatives to fit into the split world, to flee, or to die. He refused to join the government troops, he also refused, unlike the resistance fighter, to combat them. The message was: I am not against you, only because I'm not exclusively for you. He refused to flee from the situation.

Instead he resorted to an alternative that did not exist in the split world, not

knowing what exactly that would be and whether or not he and his people would

survive this choice. The outcome was a unique process of transformation. The

campesinos founded the “Association of Peasant Workers of Carare”, they sent

delegations to the armed groups, tried to negotiate with all factions and achieved a

gradual decrease in violence. Josué and other leaders would be murdered, but their

movement lives on (Lederach 2005).

Another example shows how careful and unspectacular some turning points

are, and must be in order to have a chance. It is the story of Stella Sabiiti, a woman

from Uganda who fell into the hands of Ugandan Rebels (Sabiiti 2006). She was

beaten and tortured. Stella was in her early 20s, newlywed and pregnant. She

wanted to survive and prayed that she would find an escape. She began to observe

her tormentor. At some point she saw in his eyes the pain that perpetrators

unconsciously have inside as they cause pain to others. And she knew if she

confronted him with that, he would kill her, unable to stand the pain. Thus she

continued to pray and observe in silence. The first sentence she finally said to her

tormentor was the following: “What did your wife cook for dinner last night?” -

“Why do you ask that!” he shouted, and he beat her, but not to death. And in the

course of the following days and weeks, she continued to asked similar questions,

the beatings became less and the answers more, until finally they let her go. Stella

had become a human being to her tormentor. Referring to common, sensory and

every day human experiences such as eating and having a partner, she gently

created common ground between herself, the victim, and the perpetrator, until the

division was lost and Stella was perceived as a human creature again. Stella

survived and today she works in the field of reintegration of perpetrators into their

communities.

Conclusion

The examples show that, just as splitting emerges, so too do turning points.

Transformation arises from people who, out of an inner common ground, are able to contrast prevailing dichotomous constructions and break their entrapping power.

When and how a successful turn in a conflict can be initiated, depends on many factors, and there is always something unpredictable about it. In highly escalated conflicts the way out often opens only in times of hopelessness.

The mechanism of relief through exclusion is not confined to violently escalating large group conflicts. It happens, between and inside human beings, wherever self-image is boosted by refusing affiliation to parts of the system. On what depends our own resistance to get benefit by excluding the 'other', and our ability to preserve an inner common ground in times of splitting conflict dynamics? It depends on our readiness to integrate the "other" within ourselves (Bar On, 2008). Somewhere in the multiple layers of our identity we will find everything that we are tempted to exclude as the 'other' .

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